

A photograph of two people on a small, light blue sailboat on a body of water. The person in the foreground is wearing a yellow life vest and a white long-sleeved shirt, sitting and looking towards the other person. The second person is wearing a blue life vest and a blue and white striped shirt, standing and reaching towards the mast. The boat has a blue sail and is on calm water. The background shows a reflection of the boat and the water.

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SHIP OF FOOLS

By CW3 Bill Barfknecht, Fort Eustis, Va.

Ever get the feeling in the pit of your stomach that you're getting into a bad situation? You look around and get clue after clue that things just aren't "quite right." As the author of this article relates, it's often a good idea to pay attention to those clues.

My friend and I had been planning all week to take his 16-foot catamaran sailing on Santa Rosa Sound, Florida. After I made the 3-hour trip to his house, he greeted me in his driveway and suggested we get going soon because bad weather was forecast. That should have been my **first clue**.

As we packed my trunk, my friend frantically searched for his life jackets, which he hadn't seen since last year. He finally decided that they must be with the boat, so we hit the road. When we got to Santa Rosa, where the boat was being kept on another friend's property, I got my first sight of the "vessel." It was sitting on the beach amongst some weeds. This should have been my **second clue**. It hadn't been on the water in months and my friend probably spent upwards of \$3 a year on maintenance. Even so, the boat looked to be in good shape until I opened one of the watertight compartments and was greeted by an army of carpenter ants. My friend said, "Oh, they do that every year!" I wondered, shouldn't a watertight compartment be 'ant-tight' as well.

We rigged the mast, attached the sails, loaded the cooler, and started to push the catamaran into the water. I asked my friend, "Shouldn't we put something in this drain hole?" He replied, "Oh yeah, I almost forgot!" Then I asked him about the still-missing life jackets. He rummaged through his friend's garage and returned 10 minutes later with a couple of life jackets that looked like something from a 1960s beach party movie. "These will do," he said, as we donned the skimpy life jackets and set out on the water. That should have been my **third clue**.

At first, things went pretty well. We had the wind in our faces, the sun was overhead, and it was turning out to be a great day. When we got to the middle of the sound where the ship-

ping channel cut through, I saw my friend looking around on his "sporty" life jacket. I asked, "What's up?" He said, "I usually bring a whistle so I can get the attention of other vessels if need be. But no big deal, they'll see us." That should have been my **fourth clue**.

As we sailed, he told me about the time the wind was so calm he just drifted with the current, unable to con-

trol where he was going. He'd been stuck for hours a short distance from shore, but couldn't get in because he didn't have a paddle. I looked around and noticed WE didn't have any paddles and mentioned that to him. He said, "Yeah, I was just thinking that myself. But the wind is blowing today and we're close to shore. We'll be OK." That should have been my **fifth clue**.

He told me about the time the wind blew so hard one of the wires supporting the mast broke and the mast fell into the water



Courtesy Photo

As we tacked (zigzagged) across the water, he told me about the time the wind blew so hard one of the wires supporting the mast broke and the mast fell into the water. He drifted in rough seas until a passing boater saw him and towed him to shore. "Not to worry," he said. He assured me the wires were all new, so that wouldn't happen again.

We'd just cleared the shipping channel and started to tack to get back on course. As we came about, I heard a grinding noise and watched the mast lean over and fall into the water. My friend sat there in disbelief as the sails took on water and started to sink.

This was NOT good. We were drifting near the shipping lane without paddles or signaling devices. I also noticed that we seemed to be settling deeper in the water. Apparently the water had found the same hole the ants used to get into the watertight compartment. At least we had life jackets.

We tried to clean up the mess of ropes and sails as we drifted towards the shore. We finally drifted into waist-deep water and dragged the boat onto the beach. I removed the drain plug and water began pouring out. I was right — we'd been sinking!

What did I learn from this? First, we should have checked the boat over closely before setting sail. The mast fell because a piece of hardware failed. Because of the carpenter ants, the boat nearly sank out from under us. Also, we lacked signaling devices and a paddle, which could have been disastrous if one of us had gotten hurt or the weather turned nasty. You should always use a little risk management when you go boating. You should also enroll in a boater's safety course through your Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) office or local Coast Guard Auxiliary. Don't do what I did, learn from my mistakes and be safe! ►

Boating Tips

- Have your craft inspected annually, and routinely check the boat yourself. You also can call the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary for a free safety inspection.
- Before setting out, get the latest weather forecast for your area. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration broadcasts reports regularly to keep you updated. Take your radio with you and monitor the forecast.
- Know your boat's handling characteristics and don't go beyond your skills.
- Develop a "float plan" before sailing and tell someone where you will be going.
- Don't drink and boat. The lack of lanes and traffic signals on the water can make boating even more difficult than driving a car.
- In small boats, everyone should remain seated while the boat is in motion. Keep loads spread evenly and as low in the boat as possible.
- Wear your personal flotation device (life jacket) at all times — you may not have time to put it on during a sudden emergency.
- Take a portable communication device for emergencies.
- Carry additional safety equipment such as a paddle or oars, first-aid kit, bailer bucket or scoop, anchor and line, reserve fuel, and tools and spare parts.
- When boating at night, make sure you have a light that can be seen for 2 miles.
- Maintain a clear, unobstructed view ahead at all times. Scan the area ahead on either side for any dangers.

For more information on boating safety check out the following Websites:
www.boatsafe.com, www.uscgboating.org, www.boatus.org/onlinecourse